Plato`s Theory Of Knowledge Essay, Research Paper

Plato’s Theory of Knowledge is very interesting. He expresses this theory with

three approaches: his allegory of The Cave, his metaphor of the Divided Line and

his doctrine The Forms. Each theory is interconnected; one could not be without

the other. Here we will explore how one relates to the other. In The Cave, Plato

describes a vision of shackled prisoners seated in a dark cave facing the wall.

Chained also by their necks, the prisoners can only look forward and see only

shadows, These shadows are produced by men, with shapes of objects or men,

walking in front of a fire behind the prisoners. Plato states that for the

prisoners, reality is only the mere shadows thrown onto the wall. Another vision

is releasing a prisoner from his chains, how his movements are difficult, his

eye adjustment painful and suggestions of the effects of returning to the cave.

The Cave suggests to us that Plato saw most of humanity living in "the

cave", in the dark, and that the vision of knowledge and the

"conversion" to that knowledge was salvation from darkness. He put it

this way, "the conversion of the soul is not to put the power of sight in

the soul’s eye, which already has it, but to insure that, insisted of looking in

the wrong direction it is turned the way it ought to be." Plato’s two

worlds: the dark, the cave, and the bright were his way of rejecting the

Sophists, who found "true knowledge" impossible because of constant

change. Plato believed there was a " true Idea of Justice". The Cave

showed us this quite dramatically. The Divided Line visualizes the levels of

knowledge in a more systematic way. Plato states there are four stages of

knowledge development: Imagining, Belief, Thinking, and Perfect Intelligence.

Imagining is at the lowest level of this developmental ladder. Imagining, here

in Plato’s world, is not taken at its conventional level but of appearances seen

as "true reality". Plato considered shadows, art and poetry,

especially rhetoric, deceptive illusions, what you see is not necessarily what

you get. With poetry and rhetoric you may be able to read the words but you may

not understand the "real" meaning. For example, take, again, the

shadow. If you know a shadow is something "real" then you are beyond

the state of imagination which implies that a person is "unaware of

observation and amounts to illusion and ignorance". Belief is the next

stage of developing knowledge. Plato goes with the idea that seeing really is

not always believing we have a strong conviction for what we see but not with

absolute certainty. This stage is more advanced than imagining because it’s

based more firmly on reality. But just because we can actually see the object

and not just it’s shadow doesn’t mean we know all there is to know about the

object. In the next stage, Thinking, we leave the "visible world" and

move into the "intelligible world" which, Plato claims, is seen mostly

in scientists. It stands for the power of the mind to take properties from a

visible object and applying them. Thinking is the "visible" object but

also the hypotheses, "A truth which is taken as self-evident but which

depends upon some higher truth". Plato wants us to see all things as they

really are so we can see that all is inter-connected. But thinking still doesn’t

give us all the information we crave and we still ask "why?" For Plato

the last stage of developing knowledge, Perfect Intelligence, represents

"the mind as it completely releases from sensible objects" and is

directly related to his doctrine of Forms. In this stage, hypotheses is no

longer present because of its limitations. Plato summarized the Divided Line

with "now you may take, a corresponding to the four sections, these four

states of mind, intelligence for the highest, thinking for the second, belief

for the third and for the last imagining. These you may arrange in terms as the

terms in a proportion, assigning to each a degree of clearness and certainty

corresponding to the measure in which their object pose a reality". When

discussing the Divided Line, The Forms are the highest levels of

"reality". Plato concludes here that the "real world" is not

what we see but what we understand or feel in a "intelligible world"

because it is made up of eternal Forms. The Forms take on the explanation of

existence. They are "changeless, eternal, and nonmaterial essences or

patterns of which the actual visible objects we see are only poor copies".

Plato uses a person discovering the quality of beauty to explain this, "he

will abate his violent love of the one, which he will?deem a small thing and

will become a lover of all beautiful forms; in the next stage he will consider

that there beauty of the mind is more honorable that there beauty of outward

form. Drawing towards and contemplating the vast see of beauty, he will create

many fair and noble thoughts and notions in boundless love of wisdom; until on

that shore he grows and waxes strong, and at last the vision is revealed to him

of a single science, which is the science of beauty everywhere". There are

many Forms but not everything has a Form, if this were so then there would be a

parallel world. Forms are not something we can touch but something we hold in

our minds, Plato described them as "real existence, colorless, formless,

and intangible, visible only to the intelligence". Forms do not exist per

se; they just are but can’t be touched. Plato said, "the Forms are the

cause of the essence of all other things, and the One is the cause of the

Forms". Therefor they cannot simply exist. Plato said Forms are related to

things in three ways: cause, participation and imitation. But in relation to

Forms and it-self Plato stated, "we can have discourse only through the

weaving together of Forms". Plato doesn’t mean to say that all Forms are

related to each other only that significant things use some Forms and that just

knowing that includes understanding the relationship between Forms. Plato says

there are three ways to discover Forms: recollection, dialectic and desire.

Recollection is when our souls remember the Forms from prior existence.

Dialectic is when people discuss and explore the Forms together. And third is

the desire for knowledge. Plato’s Theory of Knowledge leads us down many roads

but we see the same theme through out: light to dark; ignorant to educated;

reality to really real. In The Cave we move from the dark of the cave to the

light of outdoors, we even see a glimps of how knowledge can effect us. The

Divine Line took us from the ignorance of Imagining to the educated Perfect

Intelligence. The Forms showed us that even though we can see something does not

mean we can see all of it and just because we cannot see something does not mean

it does not exist. All three link knowledge as the key to all, if you have

knowledge there is nothing you cannot have.